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STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

*Student life has changed remarkably
in only five years*

By Mark Mossa, S.J.

The no longer surprising sound of a ringing phone in a classroom, or the chiming sound of a laptop computer booting up, signals a change in our university classrooms. Beyond the classroom, students immediately raise cell phones to their ears as they step outside. We might hope this, at least occasionally, shows an eagerness to share what one has learned in class that day. But, more often what we are witnessing is the instinct and desire to immediately reconnect with one's social network, now that class is finally over.

It's hardly a revelation that a student's social life is apt to take priority over his or her academic life. But perhaps what is new is the ease and speed with which one can leave behind the world of the classroom and plug back into one's social and extra-curricular world. Do the many competing pressures in contemporary students' lives spell doom for our hopes of their learning something from us beyond "what's on the test"?

It can certainly seem so. After two years of teaching philosophy to undergraduates at Loyola University in New Orleans, I returned to the classroom as a student in 2005. And, I'm amazed at how life as a student now is markedly different than even just five years ago. Then, the occasional laptop computer in the classroom was an unusual annoyance. Now, it's a more accepted feature of the classroom. Yet, I see as many students typing lecture notes as I see surfing the internet and reading and writing e-mails during class. And though I avoid such temptations by sticking to the traditional spiral-bound notebook, I can still find myself rushing to check my e-mail after class and even during mid-class breaks. Thus, even as my mind is trying to integrate the

insights from class lecture and discussion, I am being reminded of Jesuit community and parish responsibilities, staying connected with various social networks and trying to meet deadlines for extra-curricular writing assignments, like this one. An e-mail or cell phone call can make any one of these worlds immediately present, no matter what other world I happen to be inhabiting at the time. Sometimes, this is a welcome escape, but just as often it is a source of stress as I try to focus on more immediate priorities. I imagine this as something of a glimpse into the daily experience of many of our Jesuit university students.

Is it any wonder then that most of our students do not appear to expend as much time and effort on our classes as we would like them to? Multitasking is the order of the day and, truth be told, we encourage it.

Just listen to the laundry list of activities we rattle off to celebrate our outstanding students at graduation. Rare is the student celebrated for simply doing one or two things exceptionally well. The classes we teach have to find a place on a priority list that includes other classes (often thought-especially if we teach required core curriculum classes-more important than our own), social commitments, work and family responsibilities, not to mention numerous extra-curricular activities. It's becoming harder to chalk up our students' lack of commitment to our classes to bad will or laziness. Yes, laziness (or drunkenness) may at times be the cause; but it is also fre-

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quently a matter of priorities-sometimes misplaced; but, as I've discovered, sometimes quite reasonably ordered. The difficulty is that frequently we have no way of knowing these things. If the student is not forthcoming, we can easily take his or her neglect personally or presume that they just don't care about our class, or school in general (which will, nevertheless, still be true with some).

Must we compete for time in our students' lives against these pressures, priorities and technologies? We

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might feel pressure to adjust our expectations to our students' busy lives. Yet, we also will rightly resist any pressure to lower our standards.

It would be easier to simply manage our classes in the same way we always have, and leave it to the students to adjust to us. There's a certain "old school" attraction to this approach. But might there be a way to not compete against these pressures so much as integrate them into a more successful teaching strategy? Many of us, I would suggest, merely by being in regular contact with our students via e-mail, have already begun this integration. By taking our place in their electronic address book, we have already become, in a way, part of their social network. How might we more deliberately continue this process of integration?

As much as our challenges are rooted in contemporary technology and culture, I believe that we can find some guidance in the centuries old Jesuit educational and missionary traditions. First, we might take a cue from the success of early Jesuit missionaries around the world who were among the first to discover that the secret to evangelizing many a people was not to make them Europeans like themselves, but to meet them where they were, becoming conversant with their culture. In addition, take two long-held Jesuit educational principles, *cura personalis*, "care of the person," and the *magis*, or "the more. An internet search for these terms is liable to land you on your own university's web site. These principles are often touted on an institutional level, but perhaps we don't reflect enough on how they might be useful to our individual efforts to educate and improve our students (and ourselves). Few would dispute that the "care of the person" should characterize our work with students, but what of the *magis* might be required if in new circumstances we seek to do more than what is required?

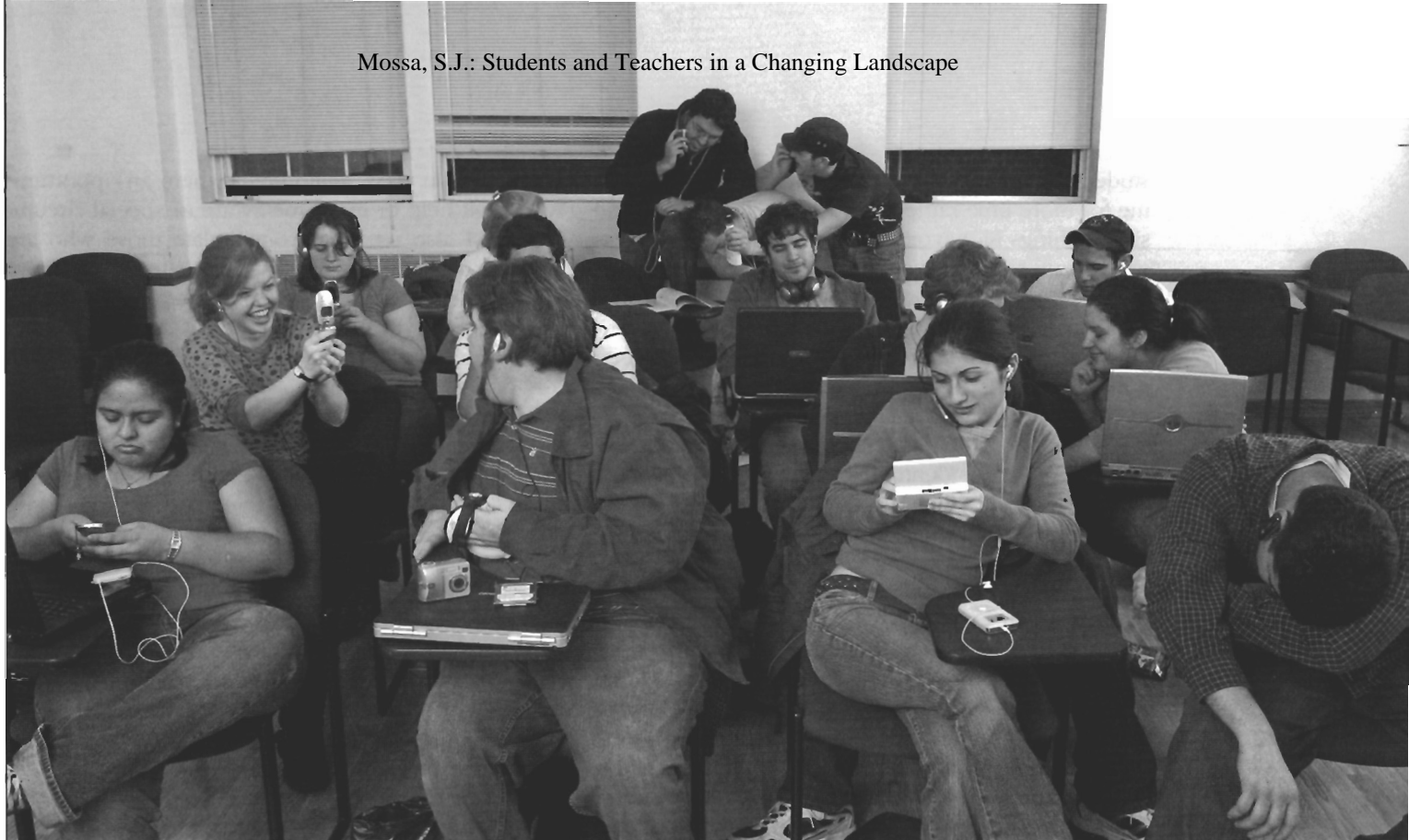
Not fifty years after their founding, the Jesuits had already achieved great success in missionary efforts

around the world. They provoked the jealousy and suspicion of other Christian missionaries because of their methods, and their success. In China, Matteo Ricci and his companions spent years studying Chinese arts, philosophy and culture before approaching the Chinese court dressed in the garb not of European Jesuits, but of Chinese scholars. Their accommodations prompted many to think that they were compromising the integrity of the Christian message. Yet the genius of Ricci and his companions was that they managed to communicate the Christian message while helping the Chinese also to achieve advances in science, mathematics and geography. We can, I think, put a similar approach to work in our classrooms.

Am I saying that we should start wearing our pajamas to class, as many a student today is apt to do? Well, no. But, like Ricci, how might we become conversant with their culture? We might try to immerse ourselves in popular culture, but that might be painful for us-and them. We need to find ways to meet them where they are, even to the point of taking risks or perhaps seeming foolish, but without compromising our integrity. We would first do well to notice the rapidity with which the landscape has changed in the past ten years and acknowledge that maybe we need to catch up.

When I began preparing for my return to teaching undergraduates in 2003, I quickly realized how different things were than when I'd last taught undergraduates only eight years before. In just a short time, technology had transformed the way in which students and teachers interact, and the way students interacted with each other. There was an expectation, for example, that I make use of classroom technology like Blackboard. To do this meant a lot more preparation work, and it also meant that students could have easier and more immediate access to me electronically. What else, I wondered, was new about this situation, and what might it demand of me?

One thing I noticed is that students seem more diverse than ever before. This was suggested by my new instructor orientation, which urged us to be sensitive to the different learning styles of our students. Again, the prospect of more preparation time which such sensitivity might entail wasn't attractive, but it affirmed what I had already begun to realize in my ministry to youth and young adults-a "one size fits all" approach wasn't likely to be any more successful in the classroom than in other ministry situations. As the semester progressed, I also realized that my students had more demands on their time than ever. Many worked part and even full-time jobs and



participated in numerous extra-curricular activities even while carrying a full-time course load. Thus, students often couldn't-or failed to-come see during my scheduled office hours.

I quickly realized that rather than them coming to me, as had been true of my previous experience, I was being forced to meet them where they were, both figuratively and literally. E-mail became the primary means of communicating with my students, but I also increased my personal contact with them by taking a cue from a fellow Jesuit, and offering more informal "office hours" in one of the on-campus eateries. This kind of "missionary" approach can be intimidating, as we are forced to meet students in a context where they are likely more comfortable than we are. But it may be that the signs of the time require that we begin seeing ourselves more as missionaries than gurus.

Our effectiveness as teachers will be severely limited if we just wait for students to come to us. To be true to the Jesuit mission of our universities, we must be willing to venture beyond our comfort zone and risk entering the wilderness of our students' lives.

We might also fashion ourselves less "the decider" and more the provider in our dealings with students. The ideal of *cura personalis* reminds us that from the beginning Jesuit education was never simply about disseminating the principles of a given field of study, or even producing scholars. It was about developing a person of moral and social as well as educational worth. Teachers at Jesuit schools took an interest in

students that went beyond merely the grasp of classroom material. Jesuit education requires that we take such an interest in our students' lives and, as those lives become increasingly more complicated, this is needed more than ever.

The proliferation of technologies on our campuses, as I suggested at the beginning of this article, does have the potential of making our students more distant and detached but, only if we let it. And nowhere is there more evidence of such detachment than in the increase in academic dishonesty occasioned by new electronic means of communication, and especially the internet. It's now easier to cheat and plagiarize than ever before. Students might text message answers to one another, or store them in a hand-held computer. They can cut and paste entire paragraphs or entire texts from the internet into their papers. They may buy an essay on a given topic on-line, even choosing the grade they might receive. Even the ease with which students can share assignments or resources has an effect. Academic dishonesty, as I've discovered, often extends beyond mere plagiarism to inappropriate forms of "help" which result in work that the student may have cooperated in, but is not his or her own. Taking steps to limit these possibilities is one of the many ways we can care for our students. I urge

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students that if they find themselves in a bind, to ask me for more time rather than resort to cheating. And simple things like avoiding offering duplicate exams each semester, or giving essay assignments which make plagiarism difficult (I often require that students include a discussion of various course materials which are not likely to have been compared widely) both limit cheating and offer opportunities for more creative engagement of class material.

We also should be vigilant about identifying academic dishonesty, which may take us some time, but which can also be as easy as performing a Google search on a phrase from a students' paper. Though this may frustratingly seem yet another burden we must take on with regard to our students, addressing this problem, no matter how futile it might seem at times, is one of the most important ways we can care for our students. As difficult as confronting a student can be, it can also be a privileged moment for us to make a difference in a student's life. It is hardly in the spirit of our institutions to simply let it go unchecked, pretending it doesn't exist. I found, to my surprise, that this was the approach of some of my colleagues. In addition to our subject matter, we should also be teaching our students integrity.

More positively, the internet can also be a means, as social networks like MySpace and Facebook suggest, of keeping us better connected. It depends how we-and our students-make use of them. I have found it necessary to warn students to wait some time after receiving an unsatisfactory grade before writing me about it, lest they write something they'll regret later. Yet, I would rather receive an e-mail like this, which suggests too high a level of comfort with our student-teacher relationship, than one in which the student feels it necessary to remind me that he or she is a student in my class. Especially at our smaller universities, where classroom size tends to be relatively small, is there really any excuse for not knowing who our students are? I make it a point to as quickly as possible know all my students by name. But I don't stop there. I also make it known to my students that I care about what's going on with them, and that I want to know sooner rather than later if something is causing them to have difficulty with the class.

This is where having taken the time to make use of a program like Blackboard proves a great help. Students can confidentially, and at times with less embarrassment, use it to e-mail me about some difficulty they are having. At mid-semester, I use Blackboard to check in with students who aren't

doing well in class, again giving them an opportunity to seek help or make me aware of special circumstances. I also use it to congratulate those who are doing particularly well, or who have shown significant improvement over the course of the semester (one student told me that it was the first time he'd ever received feedback from a professor congratulating him for doing good work). *Cura personalis* doesn't demand that we limit our expectations of our students, but that we help them to best fulfill those expectations according to-and conscious of-their limitations (among those limitations will be that some of them will not be able to earn a better than average grade).

Given all that I have suggested so far to speak now of the *magis* might seem unreasonable. If we are to be missionaries and caregivers as well as teachers, am I to suggest that we should do even more than that? That would seem unreasonable. But I would speak of the *magis* because it is indeed one of those buzzwords often heard around Jesuit campuses, one that could be easily misunderstood. The *magis* is not license for some kind of Jesuit workaholicism. It is, instead, a fundamental attitude which requires prudence and wisdom. Our students are not the only ones that have various competing pressures in their lives. Besides attending to our students, we have to attend to our own families, sit on committees and publish, among other things. The *magis* challenges us to do more within the limits of the situations we find ourselves in. It is not so much a matter of making our lives busier, as overcoming attitudes and fears which can prevent us from being more effective in our lives and in our vocations.

The changed landscape at our Jesuit universities has come quickly. The purpose of this article has been to try to illuminate what challenges this presents for us and our students, and to suggest ways that, in the spirit of the *magis*, we can begin to meet those challenges. The future of Jesuit education will stand or fall on our courage to meet our students where they are, care for them and while not overworking ourselves, and to do the more that is required by the signs of the times. ■